

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
February 26, 2023 – The First Sunday of Lent
Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11
The Fall and The Temptation of Christ
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

On this first Sunday of Lent – the season of penitence and preparation for Holy Week and Easter – the theme of our scripture readings from Genesis and from the Gospel of Matthew is temptation. Getting it wrong and getting it right. The “first Adam” who got it wrong and the “second Adam,” as Jesus is sometimes called, who got it right.

We all know the story of Adam and Eve, the Garden of Eden, and the Fall. In current Anglican theology and biblical interpretation this story of creation and fall is generally understood to be a myth and not literal truth. In other portions of the Bible – such as the writings of St. Paul – and in the theological writings of many Christian thinkers through the centuries, the literal truth of this portion of scripture is accepted, and this can be confusing. You may or may not believe in the literal truth of the story of the creation and fall, and I don't want to tell you what you should think. But I do want to explain the position of our denomination – and my own position – that these are myths which convey truth without being literally true.

So, what truth do we find in the reading from Genesis that we heard this morning? The truth is that human beings do not obey God's word and commandments, and this has happened from the very beginning of humanity. Something is very wrong in the world. Something is not as God intended. I think our own experience of being human and living among human beings supports this truth. What went wrong? This is an ancient question and a modern one. The biblical stories attempt to answer this question.

The author of Genesis tells us that God placed the first humans in the Garden of Eden with freedom to eat of every tree but one. The first woman believed the crafty serpent who lied to her about God. The serpent convinced the woman that if she disobeyed God's command not to eat of the fruit of the tree that was in the middle of the garden, she would not face the consequence that God had announced – “you shall die” – but rather, that her disobedience would be rewarded – “when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God.” The woman chose to trust the serpent rather than God. She ate the forbidden fruit, and her husband ate also. “Then the eyes of both were opened.” Too late.

The woman was tempted by the serpent's suggestion that if she ate the forbidden fruit, she would “be like God.” Here we see the temptation of the sin of pride, a temptation that crosses the boundaries of gender and every human category. We often use the term “pride” in a positive way when we speak of being proud of ourselves, another person, or a group of people for praise-worthy qualities and accomplishments. This type of pride can be paired with humility. For example, you may be proud of your success in school or work and at the same time be thankful for the gift of intelligence God gave you and your educational and employment opportunities, not available to everyone in the world. Pride and humility together in a realistic view of life. This is not sin.

When we speak of the sin of pride – which has been listed as the foremost of the “seven deadly sins” – pride is the opposite of humility. We mean something like the ancient Greek idea of *hubris*: arrogance and self-importance that defies the gods and leads to nemesis, ruin, and destruction. This kind of pride refers to a foolishly and irrationally corrupt sense of one's personal value, status, or accomplishments. St. Augustine described pride as “the love of one's

excellence.” The sin of pride is self-idolatry, love of self which takes the place of love for God. It results in contempt of others, in devaluing others in comparison to oneself, in misuse of power at the expense of others, and often to self-righteousness. Such pride is as “alive and unwell” now as it ever has been.

The antidote to the sin of pride is humility. For the first woman in the Genesis story humility would have been for her to recall that she was not God and could not be God; she was God’s creature. Let me read you a quotation from a book by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, “God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time”: “It is important to point out that humility is not pretending you don’t have gifts. Sometimes we confuse humility with a false modesty that gives little glory to the One who has given us the gifts. Humility is the recognition that who you are is a gift from God and so helps you to sit reasonably loosely to this gift. This lessens the likelihood of arrogance. ... If we truly exulted in our gifts, we would also celebrate the gifts of other people and the diversity of talents that God has given all of us.”

Now we turn to Jesus and his temptation. Jesus was in the wilderness alone and had not eaten for forty days. Then, when Jesus was weakened by hunger, the tempter came to do his work. Jesus answered each temptation with references to the Hebrew Bible. He held fast to the teaching about God in scripture. As he said when tempted to turn stones into bread, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Jesus refused to disobey God’s teaching, and finally “the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.”

Do we need to believe in the literal truth of the temptation story as it is recorded by Matthew? Not necessarily. Perhaps it wasn’t the devil orchestrating this scene in the wilderness. Perhaps what Matthew is describing is an inner battle. Being human, Jesus experienced the challenge of having God-given free will. Would he obey his own needs and desires, or would he obey God? The choice was his.

The truth conveyed in Matthew’s account of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness is that Jesus rejected the temptation to use the power available to him in a manner contrary to the will of God – not to satisfy his physical hunger or to prove that he was special or to lord it over the people and powers of this world. We have further evidence of this truth in Jesus’ ministry. He used the power given to him by God for others – to heal, to feed the hungry, to rescue people in trouble. Once he was convinced that God’s will for him was the cross, Jesus would not use the power available to him even to save himself from death. As he said to his disciples when he was arrested, “Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?” (Matthew 26:53-54). From the beginning of his ministry until he died, Jesus trusted God’s word and God’s will. That was his choice.

This Lent it may be spiritually useful for us to examine ourselves regarding the sin of pride. How steadfast are we in trusting God’s word, God’s vision of how human beings ought to behave? Do we trust God and obey God, or do we allow ourselves to be tempted by all the forces in the world around us that lead us to believe that we are “like God, knowing good and evil?” One of the benefits of gathering for Sunday worship is that we are reminded of God’s vision and of Jesus’ obedience to that vision. Scripture can re-orient us, ground us in the truth we believe in. We heard today that it is better to be like Jesus than like Eve and Adam. May we examine ourselves honestly in the light of God’s teaching and make choices to obey God rather than our “tempters,” whoever and whatever they may be, for the love of God and God’s good world, in the time given to us. In Jesus’ name. Amen.